THE COMPLETE BOOK OF

Cheese

A feast of cheese recipes, legends, anecdotes and history for everyone with good taste and a healthy appetite

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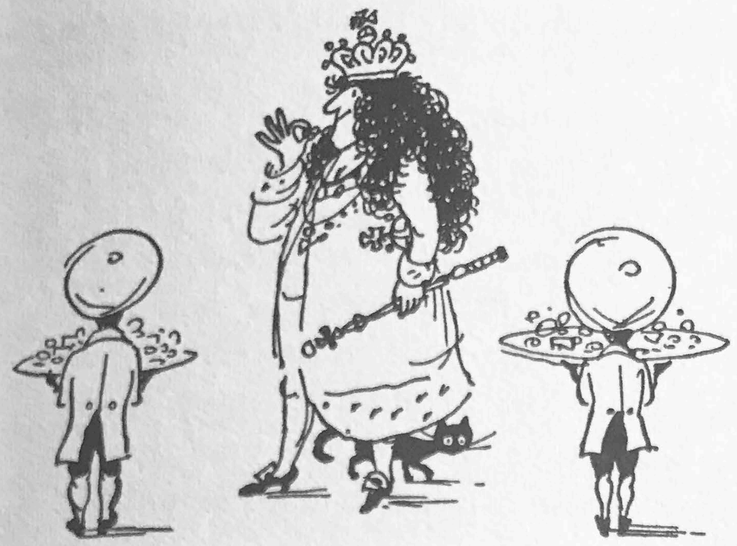
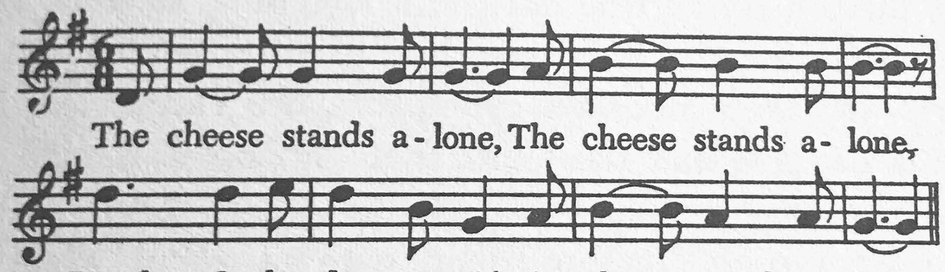
With an Introduction by CLIFTON FADIMAN



In Praise of Cheese



Some fifteen years ago, having resolved to write a book about cheese, I collected data on upwards of 500 varieties and accumulated specimens, often quite lively, from many of the countries of the world—literally from China to Peru. (China's soybean yields a courtesy cheese, *hoi poi;* Peru's cheeses I cannot recall.) The specimens have long since gone the way of all flesh—and dairy products. The data, however—so vast is the field—I have never been able to digest. Hence the book remains an unfulfilled dream of my youth.

For all that, I think a man should from time to time, in whatever poor phrases he may command, laud those gifts of God which have filled him with most joy. Let these rough notes, there-

fore, so ill-matched to the altitude of my theme, serve as a kind of thank offering.

Let them serve too as a preliminary to the main event—the book you hold in your hand. I have known the exhilarating Bob Brown for about a quarter of a century. During that period, in which the larger world has devoted itself conscientiously to the serious business of self-destruction, Bob Brown has steadily pursued his hobby—private nourishment—and his profession of writing books about food and drink. This *omnium gatherum* of information and instruction will prove one of his most inspiring manuals. No one who loves cheese can fail to enjoy it and find it useful.

Universal hungers are few: who dreams hotly of soufflé? But wine, once loved, remains a passion; so too with bread, salt, perhaps meat. As for cheese, I am on the side of the great connoisseur P. Morton Shand who deemed a love of it inherent in humanity. The Chinese, it is true, like it little, linking all milk products with their herdsmen-conquerors, the Tartars and Mongols. It is also true that man's best friend abhors it, though some dogs—house dogs, perhaps—will take to cottage cheese. But Ben Gunn, marooned on Treasure Island, with his pitiful "Many's the long night I've dreamed of cheese—toasted mostly," emblems much of mankind; and I have heard that our men on besieged Corregidor, reduced to mule meat, split into two groups—those who dreamed of chocolate, those who dreamed of cheese.

Like its great brethren, bread and wine, cheese is born of a miracle. At the very instant when the milk is on the road to ruin, mysterious lactic acid or that more mysterious ferment, rennet (extracted—who knows first by whom?—from the fourth stomach of the suckling calf), works like grace upon it and raises it to the higher life of curd. Curd, pressed and treated, is touched again by grace, this time in the guise of bacteria or mold. Time passes. Now the curd, Odysseus before Penelope, throws off its grossness, growing godlike in form and feature. It has become

Cheese. It has voyaged in one superb celestial arc to the very end of the Milky Way.

Cheese is not the gift of the cow alone, but of the ewe, the goat, the reindeer, the zebu, the buffalo, the camel, the llama, the mare, the ass, the zebra, the yak. It may even be, if we are to trust Maurice des Ombiaux's droll anecdote in his *Les Fromages*, the gift of the human female. In color it shades from the delicate rose of a virgin's blush to the grand severity of Pentelic marble. In form it is protean: the ball and the brick, the cube and the cucumber, the disc and the dumbbell, the melon and the millstone, the bologna and the ostrich egg, the pineapple and the parallelepiped. On New York's First Avenue, near East 116th Street, there used to be and perhaps still is a veritable Cellini of cheesemongers who would sculpt your cheese to your fancy.

The eye of the turophile may consider the eighteen basic varities of cheese or the thousand variations on those varieties. In either case he tries to classify. He may arrange them according to the quality of their resistance to life's onslaught: yielding, such as the chaste cream, the mold-matured Camembert, the bacteria-ripened Roquefort; firm, such as Gorgonzola or Münster; obdurate, such as Parmesan. Or, with André Simon, he may grade them by the degree of their aggressiveness: the gentle Petit Suisse, the strong Roquefort, the brutal Limburger or Marolles. Or he may borrow the late Edward Bunyard's division, based on their poetical style: the romantic cheese, like Brie, given to excess, even to tears; the classic cheese, such as Stilton, growing like Nestor nobler as it ages.

Ancient is the lineage of cheese. A legend, deeply unreliable, has it that some thousands of years ago an Arab merchant named Kanana, wandering over the desert, stopped for lunch, poured out the milk that he had kept in a skin bottle made from the lining of a calf's stomach, and found an odd but attractive-tasting mess, now known as curd. As a child, Queen Semiramis was fed cheese by the birds. Zoroaster, who flourished about 1000 B.C., lived, says Pliny, exclusively on a cheese for twenty years. (It has

been deduced that this could only have been a Gibraltar of a Parmesan weighing about one ton, twelve and a half hundredweight.)

The Greeks attributed the invention of cheese to the demigod Aristaeus, son of Apollo. In Book 9 of the *Odyssey* Homer describes the dairy techniques of the one-eyed Polyphemus who seems to have gone in for something like our domestic Ricotta, a rather insipid by-product of Asiago or Parmesan whey. Hippocrates mentions it as being made of both goat's and mare's milk. The Old Testament (see I Samuel 17:18) speaks well of cheese.

The poet Martial tells us the ancient Romans were fond of the cheeses of Toulouse. The Emperor Augustus favored them, especially Salonite cheese, which he ate with small fish, brown bread and figs. The learned Palladius, the more learned elder Pliny, mention cheese. When British soil first shook under the tread of Caesar's legions, Cheshire cheese was already being made there. His affection for Roquefort, first mentioned in a monkish chronicle of 1070, ennobles the character of Charlemagne.

The genealogy of the literature of cheese is also venerable. The first important publication, Pantaleo de Confluentia's *De Laticiniis,* was issued at Turin as long ago as 1477. Since then earnest students of the subject have not been lacking.

Enfeebled as we are by the processed horrors of our century (what dolt said good things come in small packages?), we have forgotten that cheese is what Hilaire Belloc said it is, a profound matter. Only countrymen, leading quieter, wiser lives than ours, still know this. In England's remoter countryside, when a birth is expected, a vast cartwheel of cheese is piously set aside. Day by day it is cut out at the center so that at last there remains a large ring through which on his christening day the fortunate babe is ritually passed. Switzerland's Saanen, an Emmentaler cheese, takes six years to ripen and will keep till the blast of Gabriel. In our culture, a privileged child is at birth put down for Groton and Harvard. In Switzerland, when a baby is born, a wheel of Saanen

is marked with his name. On all the holiest occasions of his mortality—christening, betrothal, marriage—his private cheese is served; and when he dies the mourners consume the last of this ceremonial Wheel of Life.

Provided it be well and truly made there is really, for the confirmed turophile, no such thing as a *bad* cheese. A cheese may disappoint. It may be dull, it may be naïve, it may be oversophisticated. Yet it remains cheese, milk's leap toward immortality.

Edam's crimson cannon balls, for example, may seem a bit plodding. But a thick round of Edam or Gouda on the blackest of bread, companioned by the blackest of coffee, makes a muscular breakfast that puts to shame epicene toast-and-orange-juice. Nor does the more reflective palate disdain that rarity, Edam, that is sharp, dry and two years of age.

Let us remember also that Balzac, no inconsiderable gastronome, pays tribute to Dutch cheeses as the cheap but sound nourisher of needy genius in its attic.

"Swiss" cheese, Emmentaler or Gruyère, would seem to have too obvious an appeal. But there is virtue in simple candor. (Try simple candor with beer.) Look to it, however, that your Gruyère betrays around its eyes that trace of lachrymose moisture which announces its ripeness, its readiness to be yours. Hardest of all to come by is the supreme Gruyère, long past its salad days when it was green in judgment—Gruyère that is rich, salty, nutlike and virtually holeless.

I will confess Bel Paese a neutral affair at best, but Taleggio shows to what it may aspire, and Pont l'Evêque seems to me the highest avatar of the type. Pont l'Evêque now appears rarely, but it has an attractive cousin in Mont Doré, a Rhone Valley whole-milk cheese I have found in many New York shops. Soft, yellow, delicate without effeminacy, Mont Doré was the favorite cheese of Pascal, whose *Pensées* must owe some of their powerful grace to its ingestion.

Parmesan, the carborundum of cheeses, is humble fare. Marry

it to onion soup and it becomes royal. One recalls Willa Cather's Bishop Latour in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, savoring such a parmesanctified soup, rich in its "nearly a thousand years of history." One bows the head in gratitude to Louis XV's father-in-law, the exiled Polish king Stanislaus Leszczynski, who made it famous. Mark well, however, that God did not make it in canisters. It was not born grated; it does not achieve gratedness; it must virtually at table have gratedness thrust upon it.

Gentlemen, let us raise our sights. Let us praise the immortal French triad, the Three Musketeers: Roquefort, Camembert, Brie.

Ewe-born, cave-educated, perfected by moldy bread, greenish-blue-veined Roquefort was called by Grimod de la Reynière "the toper's biscuit." So joyfully does it mate with wine that wine buyers will not use it as a palate cleanser lest it mask the wine's poorer qualities. The poet Baudelaire, liking perhaps its faint tantalizing hint of decay, was an amateur of Roquefort, pairing it with that Burgundy of beautiful balance, Corton. We receive great Roquefort rarely, for it is often oversalted for export purposes. Though it lacks the true Roquefort texture, our native Langlois Blue from Oregon is no bad substitute.

Esteeming Roquefort, I view it without passion. Yet I can conceive why Emile Zola, describing a cheese market, speaks of "majestic Roqueforts looking down with princely contempt upon the others, through the glass of their crystal covers."

For full persuasion Camembert, like a good orator, should stop short just this side of fluency. Before this stage it speaks of chalk; past it, of ammonia. For perfect Camembert the recipe is simple: go to Normandy. Our present law demands pasteurization of the milk before the cheese may be exported to us: the equivalent of assassination.

Perhaps this law is being slyly evaded, for I have recently eaten good Brie. (Domestic Brie, pleasant enough, is not Brie at all.) When you speak of Brie, uncover: Talleyrand called it the King of Cheeses; the only king, it has been noted, to whom he

remained faithful. In its subtlety, its delicacy, its beauty and its appeal to the intellect, Brie might quite as aptly be called the Poet of Cheeses. Like many fine poets, it is hard to get at. The ordinary cheese knife, an abomination, is powerless; a razor blade has been suggested; I have found a small demitasse spoon the very thing for those cryptic corners. A perfect Brie cannot be produced by standardized methods; it is the end product of a series of miracles. Essays are writ by fools like me, but only God can make a Brie.

As for English cheeses, only one (but that the lordliest, Stilton) seems to reach our shores today. Cheddar, Cheshire, Gloucester, Double Gloucester—all could after patient research once be found. Now, I hear, supreme examples of these cheeses are even on their native heath hard to come by. Pity; for, while England may well survive the falling away of her colonies, a falling off in her cheese whispers of some deep and stanchless inner wound.

Great Cheddar, I hope, Englishmen still enjoy. As for ourselves, domestic Cheddar lies around us in its infancy, and some in its maturity. I have found few domestic Cheddars more honest than the sharp variety sold by Jack and Marion Ayres of Sugarbush Farm, Woodstock, Vermont. But even at its shelf-cured, three-year-old Vermont best, our Cheddar cannot equal a fine English Farmhouse Cheddar. (Farmhouse Cheddar is satisfactory; the other kind merely Factory.) A good Cheddar, like a human being, needs at least nine months to round into decent enough shape to make a public appearance. I prefer a more elephantine period of gestation. A knowledgeable Englishman, John Houghton, once suggested two to five years. But his counsel was offered two and a half centuries ago when both men and cheese were allowed time to live. To Cheddar—as to all cheeses of character—Edgar's wise words in *King Lear* must apply: "Ripeness is all."

Of Stilton it is hard to speak without emotion. Its azure veins avouching noble lineage, it thrones itself as the world's most regal

Blue, exerting, like any true aristocrat, authority without aggressiveness. A Stilton's self-confidence springs from its past (the richest milk and cream) and its future, which can only be one of glory. John Galsworthy in *The Forsyte Saga* refers to "grand years-old Stilton." Charles Lamb speaks of some Stilton as "the delicatest, rainbow-hued melting piece I ever tasted." John Jay Chapman recalls a morsel "that was like Agincourt. It was sonorous, undying." Here Chapman strikes the right note. There's such divinity doth hedge a Stilton as aureoles no other cheese. It is magisterial.

See, however, that your Stilton be of a healthy cream color, not anemic, with a hint of greenish-yellow, its edges brownish, its veins wide-branching, its texture not overflaky, its vast interior uncrevassed. If you can, buy a whole Stilton or at least a half. The grandiose gesture will repay you; properly kept at room temperature a well-bought, well-bred Stilton will for many months share with you its nobility. With careful stroke remove the crown. Then cut out a wedge perhaps one and a half inches high, and further wedges as required of exactly the same height, until a new smooth top is exposed. Replace the crown so that it fits tightly; keep truncating your Stilton in this manner till you have disposed of the last bit. Then buy another Stilton.

Stilton, as I say, does reach us, as do many other fine cheeses: the unctuous Stracchino, the subtle, feminine Hablé Crème Chantilly, the devourable Provolone, the mild Gruyèrish Banquet from Iceland. Phil Alpert, the master cheesemonger of East 10th Street, New York, offers hundreds of "cheeses of all nations," but most of them are made here in excellent imitation of their originals. To secure, however, a wide and deep understanding of cheese one must and should travel. The pleasures of a cheese tour are subtler than those of a châteaux tour, for there is always the chance that you will make a great discovery. Besides, cheeses taste better on the home grounds.

We come now to our own land, with which from the cheese-lover's viewpoint we may merge our good neighbor Canada. A Rembrandtesque picture presents itself, a dramatic mingling of light and shade.

The blackest shadow, of course, is cast by processed "cheese." The word should always, like Soviet "democracy," be framed in quotes, for no matter what the law may say, I refuse to call this cheese. For me (though it is only fair to state that millions of us seem to like the stuff) processed "cheese" belongs to the same Kallikak family as ordinary commercial white bread, powdered coffee, cellophaned cake and our more popular carbonated beverages. The best I can say for it is that it is nonpoisonous; the worst, that it represents the triumph of technology over conscience.

In the preparation of this solidified floor wax—often the product of emulsification with sodium citrate, sodium phosphate or rochelle salts; of steaming and frequently blending odd lots of cheese; of paralyzing whatever germs might result either in loss of profit or gain of flavor—every problem but one is solved: packaging, keeping, distribution, slicing, cost. One problem alone is not solved: that of making cheese.

Bernard Shaw once warned us (he was speaking of mass entertainment) to be sure to get what we liked; otherwise we might begin to like what we got. There is the point—not that processed "cheese" is so bad in itself (though it is) but that its convenience, neatness and cheapness give it so many advantages that it may elbow real cheese aside and in the end compass the death of our cheese-palates. Let us not be fooled. My guinea-pig son, aged one year and seven months, was not: fed a "cheese spread," he spat it out; fed a tiny bit of Stilton he took to it like an angel. Give our American children the processed corpse of milk and they will grow (I dare not say mature) into processed men, all package and no character.

I can call to mind one exception to these strictures. But even

that is not a native product. It is a Danish import called, horribly enough, Littlefellow, a processed cheese spread, mild, creamy, with an interesting tang. As for other processed plastics, remember only that the wrappings of foil are the cerements of death.

But enough of bitterness. It is sad work and I take little pleasure in it. Processed "cheese," "cheese spreads" and "cheese foods" (often hypoed with onions, garlic and similar horrors in order to mask the taste of the corpse) represent only the baser element in what is on the whole an honorable and progressive industry. Let us joyfully aver that we have a God's plenty of sound, decent domestic cheeses, most of it Cheddarish in nature, some of it an excellent aping of greater European originals, such as Gruyère or Roquefort.

Our basic trouble is that we are in a hurry and cheese is not. Honest, edible Cheddar is easily found, but really mature, shelf-cured Cheddar, dry and on the point of the crumble, is rare. Still, I have eaten good Cheddar from Canada, Vermont, New York and Wisconsin; and I once tasted an Oregon Tillamook filled with both the goodness and the severity of God. Sage Cheddar, Vermont's pride, can be a wondrous thing. It eats supremely well on a hot summer afternoon in the country (circumstances alter cheeses), especially if you mate it incestuously with its mother, milk, and support it on cracker-barrel crackers—even though for the most part crackers are the enemy of cheese, just as bread is its friend. I mean real bread—pumpernickel, dark rye, stone-ground whole-grain bread, or crusty French loaf, not the pre-sliced leprous "bread" of large-scale commerce.

The great war, as in other areas, is between the urge to standardize and the urge to create. More often than one would think, the creator wins. One of our finest native cheeses is the work of a creative artist, Emil Frey of Monroe, New York. This cheese offers a good example of serendipity. Frey was experimenting with a formula for a German-type cheese (probably Limburger, which is originally Belgian) and accidentally came up with something new. But it takes greatness to recognize greatness, and Frey, being great, knew he had something. He called it Liederkranz—one of the most beautiful and odorous soft cheeses in the world, and named after a famous New York singing society.

The roll of individualistic, ruggedly independent American cheeses is a long one. Let me mention only a few. There is, for carefree nibbling, the plain, honest Jack from California. From the Colorado Rockies comes a little flattened sphere of black-rinded whole-milk Cheddar, Mountain Blackie—an utterly delicious, subtly acid, eating cheese, imperfect for wine but otherwise a fresh and lovely thing. Poona, a Pont l'Evêque-like cheese made in New York State, has extraordinary breeding. Canada's Oka, lineally descended from Port-Salut, can be superior, though I fear it is cured too quickly. The secretary of the Cistercian Abby of la Trappe d'Oka (where the cheese is made) writes me that its unique flavor is due "partly to the special bacteria of our cellars, and partly to the rich pasture ground of our hilly country." Its brother-abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky makes a similar cheese I have found supremely good of its kind.

Yes, the mind that refuses to be processed still lives and flourishes, in our dairies as well as in our politics and arts and sciences. Certain strange and wonderful cheeses of Europe I may never taste—Sweden's Prestost or Saaland Pfarr, whose curd is washed in whiskey; Rumania's Brânja de Cosulet, a creamy sheep's-milk cheese, resinous from its pine-bark casing; Septmoncel from the Jura, ranked by some experts above Roquefort; England's esoteric Blue Vinny and Wensleydale . . . But no matter: there is enough fine cheese in my own country to last my time and give it edge, savor and unctuousness. And there is always the hope that, like a new planet, a truly supreme American cheese will swim into my ken and that I too shall at last look

". . . with a wild surmise,
Silent, upon a peak in dairyin'."

Clifton Fadiman